

*Revelation's
Vision
of a Prostitute*



13 in a series

Introduction

The movie “Pretty Woman” released in the early 1990’s was in many respects an unusual romantic comedy. In the film, Julia Roberts played the part of a prostitute who was rescued from her working situation by falling in love with a billionaire client. The billionaire businessmen - played by Richard Gere - also fell in love with her.

The story showed Julia Robert’s character being ‘redeemed’ from her occupation and becoming a respectable woman. And as the Hollywood version goes - they all lived happily ever after.

As we study Revelation chapter 17, we are confronted with a prostitute who has a story that’s almost the reverse of “Pretty Woman”. In this study we discover who this symbolic prostitute represents and see how she began as a ‘righteous’ woman but over time became a shameless prostitute. Her choice of company is no longer Jesus Christ but something far more sinister.

As we read through the book of Revelation, it’s important to remember a key issue concerning our spiritual life – that is, *there is nothing we have done, no matter how bad or sinful, that cannot be forgiven through the sacrifice of Jesus.*

God’s free gift of grace is available to all who seek Him.

However, there’s a critical time that comes to us all when we must make a decision and choose whose side we are on. A personal relationship with Jesus demands attention now, and any procrastination in making a decision for Christ could lead to an eternal loss. In Revelation’s language we should be seeking to receive “the seal of the living God” (Rev. 7:2) rather than be doomed and suffer the awful consequences of receiving the “mark of the beast” (Rev. 13:17).

Revelation – and specifically the story of the Prostitute of chapter 17 - contains a warning message for readers. The warning message is that it’s easy to compromise gradually on Godly truth and wander from the true spiritual pathway. We do this by not committing personally to the biblical principles of God’s kingdom. As we will see in this session, the results of this unfaithful woman’s departure from truth are not very ‘pretty’.

Overview for Session #13

1. Key Issues in Revelation
2. The Vision of the Prostitute
3. The Vision Explained
4. The Final Great Battle

1. Key Issues in Revelation

So far in our studies of the book of Revelation we've seen:

i. The Centrality of Christ

In Revelation, it can be easy to focus too much on the graphic imagery of beasts and monsters - but we need to remember that **Jesus is the central theme of Revelation**. The very opening sentence of this book tells us Revelation's message is about Jesus and comes from Jesus.

ii. The Use of Old Testament Imagery

The Apostle John referred to Old Testament imagery as he wrote Revelation under inspiration from the Holy Spirit. This imagery is used to refocus on the story of God's kingdom after the resurrection of Jesus and carries us right through to the climactic Second Coming of Jesus in glory. A deeper understanding of God's ultimate purpose is more readily understood through our study of Revelation. While this knowledge blesses us personally it also deepens our special walk with Jesus as we commit to Him each day.

iii. The Importance of the Ten Commandments

We've seen how the Ten Commandments should be incredibly important to God's people. The messages in these Commandments form a key part of how He wants us to live. **The core theme in the Ten Commandments is LOVE** and this is the principle upon which God's kingdom is based. Our obedience to these Commandments is to display our love and appreciation for God, as well as to our family, friends, and community.

iv. The Battle Between Good and Evil

In Revelation we see a better view of the opposing force to God in the universe, and it's led by the fallen angel Satan. Satan has dedicated his time to battle against the God of the universe and in particular those who stay faithful and obedient to God (Re. 12:17).

According to Revelation, Satan's main strategy near the end of time is to form an unholy trinity with the "Sea Beast" and the "Land Beast" (Rev. chapter 13). With the support of Satan's demonic angels the Devil fights against God and the faithful believers in Jesus. God's remnant people are described as those who keep God's commandments and have the testimony of Jesus. However, Revelation promises that this spiritual battle is one Satan ultimately loses (Revelation chapter 20)

This "end time" period before Christ's Second Coming is certainly a time of great trial for God's people. But we are assured that God is with us and sustains those who have placed their faith in Christ. At the final end of this great battle they will receive an eternal reward. Death, suffering, and all forms of evil will come to end forever (Revelation 21:4).

2. Revelation chapter 17: The Vision of the Prostitute

Revelation chapter 17 is one of the most difficult to interpret in the book, so don't become frustrated if the issues of this chapter aren't clear on first reading (we'll review some of the issues again in our next lesson in order to deepen our understanding of its significance).

The first thing to keep in mind is the term "Babylon" is used in Revelation as symbolic of the forces that persecute Christ's people and fight against the principles of God's kingdom. It has similar oppressive characteristics as the literal kingdom of Babylon in the Old Testament (see the book of Daniel). In Revelation, Babylon is an end-time manifestation of a religious, political, and satanic influence that fights against God and His people in the end-time just before Christ's Second Coming.



Now, let's read Revelation 17:1-6 and the vision John receives describing "Babylon" as like a Prostitute: *¹Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and talked with me, saying to me, "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters, ²with whom the kings of the earth committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth were made drunk with the wine of her fornication."*

³So he carried me away in the Spirit into the wilderness. And I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which was full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns.

⁴The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication. ⁵And on her forehead a name was written:

MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

⁶I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. And when I saw her, I marvelled with great amazement.

Some of the imagery John is inspired with in Revelation 17:1-6 comes from the fall of the ancient city of Babylon to the Persian Empire in 539BC (the kingdom of Babylon was an ancient kingdom that destroyed the city of Jerusalem decades earlier). Notice what is says in the Old Testament book of Jeremiah:

*Flee from the midst of Babylon,
And every one save his life!
Do not be cut off in her iniquity,
For this is the time of the Lord's vengeance;
He shall recompense her.*

*⁷ Babylon was a golden cup in the Lord's hand,
That made all the earth drunk.
The nations drank her wine;
Therefore the nations are deranged.*

*⁸ Babylon has suddenly fallen and been destroyed.
Wail for her!*

*Take balm for her pain;
Perhaps she may be healed.*

*⁹ We would have healed Babylon,
But she is not healed.*

Forsake her, and let us go everyone to his own country;

For her judgment reaches to heaven and is lifted up to the skies (Jeremiah 51:6-9)



Question 1: What similarities do you notice in Revelation 17:1-6 and Jeremiah 51:6-9?

Here we can see how the book of Revelation uses the Old Testament kingdom of Babylon as a symbol for a future power that tries to bring down the “New Jerusalem” of God’s eternal kingdom at the end of time.

In Revelation 17:1 the Apostle John is told that he is going to see a prostitute sitting on “many waters”. The actual ancient city Babylon sat on the famous Euphrates River, and Revelation 17:15 tells us this “many waters” that Revelation’s end-time “Babylon” sits on is symbolic of worldwide popular support. And in verse 5 we see the name ‘Babylon’ written on the Prostitute’s forehead.

In a previous study (Session 7) we saw Bible imagery symbolising a woman as representing the church of God on the earth (e.g. Jeremiah 3:20, Isaiah 54:5-6, Hosea 2:14-23, 2 Corinthians 11:2, Ephesians 5:25-32). In the Bible, a “righteous and faithful woman” is used to symbolize a faithful and obedient church - but a prostitute/unfaithful woman is used to represent a disobedient and rebellious church. So, this prostitute of Revelation chapter 17 is symbolic of an apostate church just prior to Christ’s Second Coming.

It is important to note exactly where John sees the prostitute – it’s in the desert/wilderness (Rev. 17:3). In Revelation 12:14, John also saw this woman in the wilderness - however at this time the woman was pure. This is why John is greatly astonished (Rev. 17:6) by the transformation of the woman when he sees her again in Revelation chapter 17. **It would seem somewhere between the resurrection of Jesus and His Second Coming the church has become unfaithful.**

Question 2: What do you think might be the meaning of the prostitute being “drunk with the blood of the saints” (Rev. 17:6)? _____

3. The Vision Explained

In Revelation 17:7-11 we see the first part of the vision being explained to John by the angel. As we read we see some extra information in the vision which gives us more information about Satan’s use of this end-time “Babylon”.

Read Revelation 17:7-11: ⁷ But the angel said to me, “Why did you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman and of the beast that carries her, which has the seven heads and the ten horns. ⁸ The beast that you saw was, and is not, and will ascend out of the bottomless pit and go to perdition. And those who dwell on the earth will marvel, whose names are not written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world, when they see the beast that was, and is not, and yet is. ⁹ “Here is the mind which has wisdom: The

seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits. ¹⁰ *There are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, and the other has not yet come. And when he comes, he must continue a short time.* ¹¹ *The beast that was, and is not, is himself also the eighth, and is of the seven, and is going to perdition.*

Question 3: According to Revelation whose names are written in the Book of Life (See Revelation 3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 21:27?) _____

The extra information we now see in the Angel's explanation of the vision to John (Rev. 17:7-18) is that the prostitute is sitting on top of the beast with seven heads and ten horns. We last saw this beast in Revelation 13:1-10 - just after we first saw the woman in Revelation chapter 12.

In a previous study (Session 9) we saw this beast identified as the Medieval Christian Church. The Medieval Christian Church during this period had significant power for more than a thousand years - particularly for the 1,260 year period (536AD to 1798AD) referenced in Revelation 12:6, 12:14, and 13:5. The Church lost its power - but Revelation 17:8 predicts that this power will have a resurrection and amaze everyone whose names are ***not written in the Book of Life***. The people who are not followers of Christ are described in Revelation as *'those who dwell on the earth'*. Those who've truly committed to Christ have their names written in Revelation's Book of Life - a promise to all believers that they will be rewarded with the gift of everlasting life.

Question 4: What is the identity of the Beast in Revelation 17? _____

The description in Rev. 17:8 of the beast is that "*he once was, now is not, and yet will come*". This tells us the beast will have three phases of existence:

- i. **The first phase** *'he once was'* refers to its activities during the 1,260 years of Revelation 13:5 which ended in 1798 with the events of the French Revolution.
- ii. **The second phase** *'now is not'* is its "dormant phase" referring to the time between its loss of power after 1798 and just prior to its 'resurrection'.
- iii. **The third phase** *'and yet will come'* is its miraculous resurrection to life in order to battle for one last time against God's faithful people. This occurs just prior to the Second Coming of Jesus (see Revelation 17:8 & 13:8). **This is Revelation's prediction of an end-time resurrection of a religious power with the same characteristics of the historical Medieval Christian Church.**

Question 5: What is the reason for using “Babylon” as the symbol of oppression in Revelation? _____



Megiddo on the edge of the Valley of Jezreel

The verses in Revelation 17:9-10 have been interpreted in many ways. One view is that the seven hills refers to the Beast’s headquarters - the city of Rome, which is built on seven hills. As we investigate the explanations closely, we will see the true meaning goes somewhat deeper. Where the woman sits also represents seven kings of which five have already fallen. The sixth is said to currently reign and the final one is yet to come (Rev. 17:10)

To understand these texts, we need to know that in the Old Testament “hills and mountains” often represented world powers and empires (examples of this symbolism can be found in Jeremiah 51:25, Ezekiel 32:2-5, Daniel 7:35, Psalm 48:1-3 and Isaiah 29:8). The “hills/mountains” in Revelation ch. 17 seem to be successive – that is they come one after the other. The correct conclusion is to see these successive powers as instruments Satan has used over the centuries to oppose God and oppress His people. Therefore, the power *‘that now is’* from John’s perspective of time is the pagan Roman Empire – the dominant kingdom at that time. The five kingdoms that oppressed God’s people and fell before Rome were: 1. Egypt, 2. Assyria, 3. Babylon, 4. Persia and 5. Greece.

All of these kingdoms oppressed God’s people through the centuries - Egypt enslaved God’s people; Assyria destroyed and scattered the Northern tribes of Israel; Babylon destroyed Jerusalem; Persia came close to annihilating God’s people at the time of Queen Esther; Greece severely oppressed Jews at the time of the king Antiochus Epiphanes IV; and the pagan Roman Empire also oppressed both Jews and Christians.

Question 6: What do hills and mountains symbolize in the Old Testament? _____

The kingdom that '*has not yet come*' (Rev. 17:10) is the Medieval Christian Church who persecuted God's people with great severity after the Roman Empire.

Satan has been inciting all of these powers and he does his destructive work through human kingdoms, governments and institutions. Furthermore, there is an eighth and final kingdom in the future arising out of the beast to do a work similar to the seventh kingdom (Rev. 17:11). But God's people shouldn't be overly concerned because we are given an assurance that this kingdom will finally be defeated. This end-time religious power will have similar characteristics to the previous "seven heads" (or powers) of biblical history.

4. The Final Battle

Revelation 17:12-18 ¹² *"The ten horns which you saw are ten kings who have received no kingdom as yet, but they receive authority for one hour as kings with the beast. ¹³ These are of one mind, and they will give their power and authority to the beast. ¹⁴ These will make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings; and those who are with Him are called, chosen, and faithful."*

¹⁵ *Then he said to me, "The waters which you saw, where the harlot sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues. ¹⁶ And the ten horns which you saw on^[a] the beast, these will hate the harlot, make her desolate and naked, eat her flesh and burn her with fire. ¹⁷ For God has put it into their hearts to fulfil His purpose, to be of one mind, and to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled. ¹⁸ And the woman whom you saw is that great city which reigns over the kings of the earth."*

In these verses we read about another "ten kings" (the imagery here comes from the famous vision in Daniel chapter 7, specifically verse 24). These "ten kings" arise on the earth at the end of time for only a very brief period – Revelation says 'one hour' (Rev.17:12-14). These powers are during the time of the eighth and final head of Satan's power and the earth's final crisis. This powerful group – whoever they are - arranges world-wide support for Satan right at the end of time. (Please Note: The specific details for these future events aren't given in scripture and it would therefore be unwise to speculate too much on the specifics of this event – but it's important to keep the broader implications in mind).

The promise of Revelation is that the great final spiritual battle between God and Satan is fought and won by the Lamb (Rev. 17:14). This final spiritual battle is sometimes called battle of "Armageddon" (Revelation 16:16) - which is the sixth plague of the 'Seven Last Plagues' of Revelation chapter 16.

The good news is that in the very end Babylon falls and through our faith in Christ God's people win. Very soon they will see the glorious Second Coming of Christ and experience victory and everlasting life.

Question 7: Who is the Lamb of Revelation 17:14? _____

Question 8: What is the final outcome of the last battle between good and evil?

Question 9: Do you see yourself as one of God's faithful people who will be saved in the end?

